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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a nontechnical analysis of the philosophical theory of speech acts as a paradigmatic explanation of interpersonal communication. A contrast is drawn between the idea that meaning is "in people" and the speech act theory that meaning is an interpersonal construct. There are nine conditions of interpersonal communication that must exist for a statement to have meaning to a speaker and a listener: both persons speak the same language; the speaker articulates a promise in the sentence uttered; in expressing that promise the speaker obligates himself to a future act; both the speaker and the listener have a clear preference for the speaker keeping his promise; the promise predicates a future act that normally would not happen without the making of the promise; the speaker is sincere in his purpose: the speaker intends that the utterance of the sentence will place him under an obligation to do the future act; the speaker intends to produce in the listener the knowledge that the utterance of the sentence places the speaker under an obligation to do the future act; and the semantical rules of the dialect spoken by the speaker and the listener are such that the sentence is correctly and sincerely uttered. (WR)

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THE "SPEECH ACT" PARADIGM IN CURRENT ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

The paper presents a non-technical analysis of the philosophical theory of "speech acts" as a paradigmatic explanation of interpersonal communication. A contrast is drawn between the idea that meaning is "in people" and the speech act theory of meaning as an interpersonal construct. This is to say, the commonly accepted view that language reflects personal experience in communication is compared with the speech act theory that linguistic meaning is an interpersonal action.

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During his inaugural lecture on "Meaning and Truth" at the University of Oxford in November of 1969, P. F. Strawson took up what was at the time a key problem in the philosophy of language. Professor Strawson formulated the problem as "the conflict of formal semantics."[1] The significance of Strawson's statement lies not so much in the acknowledgement of competing theories, as in the recognition of the interpersonal nature of the communication act. In the analysis that follows, I want to argue that the philosophical theory of "speech acts" is a paridgmatic account of meaning in interpersonal communication and not merely a logical, philosophical account of what it is for an individual to use language with sense and reference. Put more simply, I am suggesting that meaning can best be understood as the recognition of a mutual intention between a speaker and listener, rather than just the analogical coincidence of two personal sets of linguistic experience.

I

Historically speaking, the theory of speech acts emerged from the writing of John L. Austin, most notably in his book How To Do Thing With Words.[2] It is important for our purposes to note simply that Austin hypostatized three types of species of speech act. First, there is the locutionary act which has a meaning; and, there is the illocutionary act which has a certain force in saying something. Third, the perlocutionary act achieves a certain effect by being said.[3] In this breakdown, Austin brought to light several important distinctions about meaning within the context of speech communication. He separated constantive statements, which are susceptible to being true or false, from performative statements which are actions per se. Also, he provided a clear distinction between those theorists who utilize formal semantics (or the rules of language) and those theorists who rely upon logical analysis (or the rules of formal expression) to explain the nature of meaning within human linguistic behavior.

These fundamental tenets of the speech act theory have subsequently been enlarged and refined, principally, by H. P. Grice's theory of non-natural meaning[4] and its subsequent inclusion in John R. Searle's study of illocutionary acts as paradigmatic speech acts of communication.[5] It is precisley these advances on Austin's theory that I want to discuss since they account for the thesis I am suggesting.

In brief, Grice argues that there is a natural sense of the word "mean" which can be exemplified in a sentence which has the form "A means (meant) to do so-and-so (by X)" or "A means (meant) by X that ..."[6] Put into the context of interpersonal communication, Grice is suggesting that non-natural meaning is a situation where, to say that a speaker means something by X is to say that the speaker intended the utterance of X to produce some effect in the listener by means of the listener's recognition of this (the speaker's) intention.

We should note in passing that Grice's theory of speech act meaning has parallel articulation in the "Co-orientation" hypothesis of the psycholcgist Theodore Newcomb.[7] Succinctly, Newcomb suggests that during interpersonal communication a co-orientation or symmetry of behavior develops which in fact accounts for communicative meaning. I mention Newcomb's work primarily to indicate that the philosophic theory of speech acts that I am discussing has its hypothetical counterpart in experimental psychology. In short, both philosophy and psychology have articulated a theory of communicative meaning that is based in the peron-to-person construct of mutual intentionality.

II

At this point, we are faced with a problem. Most of us can readily accept the thesis I have put forward, namely, that interpersonal communication consists of a listener recognizing meaning by simultaneously recognizing the speaker's intention in whatever he utters. Yet, anyone of us who has come into contact with a contemporary book on interpersonal communication will recollect that in the tradition of General Semantics meaning is not in language or speech, but inside people.[8] What this metaphorical conception suggest is that meaning is experience bound, bound virtually to the individual person. As John Keltner comments, "We must accept the disheartening probability that neither of us can ever completely grasp a meaning as the other has experienced it."[9] The equivocation of "meaning" and "experience" is fairly obvious in all of this.

The fundamental issue at hand is that our understanding of experiences is no more precise than our conception of meaning. And, to suggest that since experience is person specific meaning must also be personal is intuitive speculation at best. The proof of the criticism comes in an extended explanation, usually to the effect that communication occurs when and where one person can experience by analogy what another person senses. If experience is person specific, it is unique and analogy to another unique set of experience is logically not possible. Or, if personal experience is not unique but only private, direct communication is logically possible and theoretically we should not have any problem saying exactly what we mean.

However, it is more useful for us to conceive of communication in its classical sense as a "sharing"between people. What is shared is not some analogy of experience, but the mutual recognition of an intention in the expression uttered by a speaker act, not of the speaker or listener, but as the action of both persons conjointly. The speech act has no communicative force (no meaning) from just the speaker's point of view nor just the listener's view. Put another way, the meaning that we call communication is not just a person's individual experience of language rather it is the conative expectation of both speaker and listener that results in action, a linguistic act emboding the mutual intentionality of a speaker and listener. A speech act is literally performed by two persons, hence Austin's distinction between the constantive speech act of the individual that can be true or false to another and the performative speech act which is an act carried out with a certain mutual force or effect as between one person and another.

Perhaps it would be helpful to illustrate the present analysis by distinguishing perlocutionary acts which have effect and illocutionary acts which have force. First, let's look at a perlocutionary speech act. When a speaker says to a listener: "You persuaded me to buy that new car"; the speaker's statement records a certain accomplished effect or result, namely that the speaker was persuaded. Illocutionary acts on the other hand create a certain linguistic force which is another way of saying that they specify information, i.e. a given sense and reference is prescribed by the speaker's utterance. For example, if a speaker says to a listener: "I promise

to buy you a new car tonight"; then, the statement has a certain force, namely that I have promised. The mere uttering of the words "I promise..." has the force of committing the speaker to an obligation to fulfill the listener's expectation. In short, an illocutionary act is by definition an action accomplished with another person in the uttering of the sentence.

It is precisely at this point in our analysis that Grice's theory of non-natural meaning and Searle's conception of illocutionary acts provides a paradigmatic explanation of communication-intention as a theory of interpersonal communication. The illocutionary speech act is paradigmatic in the sense that it can only be explained in terms of an interpersonal recognition of intention as the basis for mutual expectation and understanding between a speaker and listener. Take our previous example again. A speaker utters the sentence: "I promise to buy you a new car tonight." That statement will have meaning to the speaker and listener only if the following nine conditions of interpersonal communication exist.

1. Normal input and output conditions obtain. That is, both persons speak the same language, are physically capable of speaking and hearing and the like.

2. The speaker expresses the proposition that p (the promise) in the utterance of the sentence. In other words, the promise is articulated in the sentence uttered.

3. In expressing that p (the promise), the speaker predicated a future act of himself. Thus, the speaker undertakes an obligation to act in the future in a certain way with respect to the listener.

4. The listener would prefer the speaker's doing A (the future act) to his not doing A, and the speaker believes that the listener would prefer his doing A to his not doing A. Hence, both the speaker and the listener have a clear preferance for the speaker keeping his promise.

5. It is not obvious to both the speaker and the listener that the speaker will do A (the future act) in the normal course of events. In other words, the promise predicated a future act that normally would not happen without the making of the promise.

6. The speaker intends to do A (the future act). That is, the speaker is sincere in his purpose.

7. The speaker intends that the utterance of the sentence ("I promise ...") will place him under an obligation to do A.

8. The speaker intends (intention 1) to produce in the listener the knowledge (K) that the utterance of the sentence is to count as placing the speaker under an obligation to do A. The speaker intends (intention 2) to produce K by means of the recognition of "intention 1," and he intends "intention 1" to be recognized in virtue of (by means of) the listener's knowledge of the meaning of the sentence.

9. The sematical rules of the dialect spoken by the speaker and listener are such that the sentence is correctly and sincerely uttered if and only if conditions one through eight obtain.[10]

It should be somewhat obvious in these nine conditions for the interpretation of our example "I promise to buy you a new car tonight" that meaning is not in the speaker or listener. Rather, meaning is an interpersonal communication that is implicit in the language construct used by the speaker and recognized by the listener. The mutual construction of intentionality emerges from the actions of people, from their linguistic actions. There is nothing metaphorical about the illocutionary act that specifies conative meaning as a given type of intention, e.g. an informative utterance. Nor, is there any ambiguity about perlocutionary acts that are linguistic acts recording (as effects) the actions of the participants to the communication, e.g. a persuasive utterance.

III

In conclusion, let me suggest that Grice's account of non-natural meaning allows us to focus upon meaning as an action performed in language, rather than merely assuming that language reflects experience. Similarly, Searle's explanation of the illocutionary act provides a paradigm for explaining how a speech act accounts for meaning in an interpersonal situation in which a speaker and a listener construct a synergistic intention. In this context, then, the speech act theory is an innovative semantic theory of interpersonal communication.

FOOTNOTES

1. P.F. Strawson, Logico-Linguistic Papers (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1971), p. 171.

2. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.

3. Austin, How To Do Things With Words, p. 120.

4. H.P. Grice, "Meaning" in Philosophical Logic, ed. P.F. Strawson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 39-48.

5. John R. Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1969).

6. Grice, "meaning," p. 40.

7. Theodore M. Newcomb, "An Approach to the Study of Communication Acts," The Psychological Review,60 (November, 1953), pp. 393-404.

8. E.g., John W. Keltner, Interpersonal Communication: Elements and Structures (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1970), pp. 66, ff.

9. Ibid.

10. Searle, Speech Acts, pp. 57-61.